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One Nation Under Baseball

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ONE NATION UNDER BASEBALL

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Under Baseball

How the 1960s Collided
with the National Pastime

JOHN FLORIO AND
OUISIE SHAPIRO

Foreword by Bob Costas

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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Set in Whitman by John Kloppig.

For the 26 guys who introduced
me to the joy of baseball:
my dad and the 1968 Yankees

JF

For my first coaches:
Alan and Chuck Shapiro

OS

Foreword

Bob Costas

Politics and social issues have no place in sports. *Sports*. Sports is a respite from all that. It's where I go to escape. Sports are sacrosanct, and even to acknowledge, let alone delve into, the countless times that larger issues intersect with sports is out of bounds.

Believe me, I am familiar with these arguments—if you can call them that. Curiously, they seem to be raised only by those who disagree with, or are made uncomfortable by, the athletes and commentators who dare to address pertinent subjects beyond a late-inning pitching change or an early-round draft choice. Just as curious, political views that align with their own are, of course, seldom a problem.

I shudder to think what additional ad hominem attacks, misrepresentations and sheer falsehoods would have been directed at Jackie Robinson, Hank Aaron, Curt Flood, Marvin Miller, and the rest had the internet, cable television, and talk radio existed during that time.

In *One Nation Under Baseball: How the 1960s Collided with the National Pastime*, John Florio and Ouisie Shapiro focus on the 1960s, the most turbulent American decade of the second half of the twentieth century. Despite the protests of the “Shaddup and tell me the score” crowd, the forces affecting and profoundly changing America were also having a dramatic effect on sports and, for our purposes here, on baseball in particular.

Labor relations, players' rights, shifting population centers, the opening of new baseball markets, the emergence of television as a major factor, the evolving role of the sports press, the increasing willingness of young people to assert their individuality and challenge the status quo. And, of course, the persistent issues of race. They all affected baseball as surely as they did America as a whole. In fact, in some cases, sports—baseball included—weren't just touched by these issues, they personified them.

In the pages that follow, careful research, telling details, and rich and revealing personal stories combine to give us a better sense of how those dynamics affected and, in some ways, transformed baseball.

It is often said (with appreciation and a fair measure of truth) that baseball is a constant in an ever-changing world. That its rituals, traditions, and familiarity are a huge part of its appeal. A source of comfort as much as of interest. Agreed.

But that does not mean that baseball exists in a bubble and somehow can (or should) be immune to the social forces raging around it. That has never been the case. And perhaps no period of time proved that point as well as the 1960s did.

The '60s were a time of conflict, progress, tragedy, triumph, and unforgettable events in the nation and its pastime. *One Nation Under Baseball* connects the two in revealing and insightful fashion. Hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

A Note to the Reader

One Nation Under Baseball relies on first-person interviews and archival materials. When quoting from our interviews, we have omitted attribution. When quoting from secondary sources, such as books, newspapers, and magazines, we've provided attribution within the narrative.

1

I'm calling on behalf of Senator Kennedy.

That's what the guy had said, and if Mudcat Grant were white, he may have trusted him. But for black ballplayers like Grant, prank calls were commonplace—and in some cases dangerous. They came at all hours, in all forms, and were often accompanied by death threats. This one had come by way of a ringing telephone in Grant's room at the Sheraton Cadillac in Detroit, the majestic hotel in which the twenty-five-year-old pitcher was staying with the rest of the Cleveland Indians.

The caller was still talking. "Mr. Kennedy would like to have breakfast with you."

"I'm sorry," Grant said and quickly hung up.

The phone rang again. And again. And again.

Grant ignored it each time, and went back to reading the morning paper. It was Labor Day 1960 and barely eight o'clock. He was scheduled to pitch the first game of a doubleheader against Detroit in a few hours. The game was meaningless—the Tigers and the Indians were both out of contention—but it mattered to Grant. One more win and he'd match his career high of ten, which he'd posted each of the previous two seasons.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Grant got up off the bed and looked through the peephole. Standing in the hallway were two white men wearing identical suits and deadpan expressions—and flashing ID cards. They looked official enough, so Grant let them in.

"Mr. Kennedy is a big fan of yours," they said, explaining that they worked for the Massachusetts senator. "He'd like you to join him for breakfast in the hotel."

Hard as it was to believe, the phone calls had been legit. Grant got dressed and, within minutes, was sitting in the hotel dining room sharing eggs and coffee with the man who'd won the Democratic nomination for president six weeks earlier. John F. Kennedy told Grant how

much he admired the black ballplayers that had been pioneering integration in the Majors; he went on to say that he'd followed the career of Grant's former roommate, Larry Doby, who'd broken the color line in the American League three months after Jackie Robinson had done the same with the Dodgers in the National League.

Sitting across from each other, Kennedy and Grant made for an odd couple: one an Irish-Catholic politician, born into money and prestige, his skin tanned, his collar starched, his thick, nasal Boston accent unmistakable; the other a brown-skinned southerner, the grandson of a slave raised in the blinding hatred of Jim Crow. (Racism had followed Mudcat into the minors, which is where he got his nickname. Some white teammates, upon seeing James Timothy Grant for the first time, said he had the face of a Mississippi mudcat—and the derisive moniker had stuck.)

"You're from Locawoochee, Florida?" Kennedy asked.

"Lacoochee," Grant said, correcting the senator's pronunciation of his birthplace, surprised the man knew so much about him.

Grant explained that it was in Lacoochee's black quarters, fifty miles northeast of Tampa, that his mother, Viola, had raised him and his six siblings. He could barely remember his father and namesake James, who'd been a log cutter at the local mill; the elder James had fallen ill on the job and died of pneumonia when Grant was a young boy.

The town Grant described to Kennedy was the Lacoochee of the late '40s and '50s, the one whose mill shut down once the area had run out of cypress trees, the one that had gone into an economic tailspin shortly thereafter.

Grant told Kennedy, too, how his elementary school teacher had introduced him to a wide range of music, and how his mother, who'd worked as a maid and directed the choir at Mount Moriah Baptist Church, had taught him to sing. But he didn't sugarcoat his story: He was raised in the Deep South, where, for blacks, opportunities had been practically nonexistent. He told the senator about the tumbledown row house that had served as his elementary school, about the school's secondhand books, about the books' torn and missing pages.

Still today, Grant has vivid memories of the indignities he'd suffered as a kid in Lacoochee. These are Mudcat's words, from Bill Staples and Rich Herschlag's *Before the Glory*:

The very minute you walked out of your house, there were incidents that were out of line. As a black person, you had water fountains you couldn't drink from. There were restaurants you couldn't go into. You had to always watch where you were and know what you were going to do, because there was something that was going to happen to you every day. You knew of lynchings. You would hear it in the night, and if you didn't, word came through the next town that somebody was hanged or somebody was castrated. There used to be a law called "reckless eyeballing." If they saw you looking at a white lady, you could be charged with "reckless eyeballing." Sometimes, whites would get drunk, go riding through town, and fire guns into your house. That was done to my family. I remember my mother putting me down by the fireplace to keep the bullets from hitting me. That was called "nigger-shooting time."

Kennedy listened intently for nearly an hour, and when the two finished eating, he thanked Grant for his time and reassured him that he was working with Congress to end segregation.

Soon after their meeting, Kennedy stood on a makeshift podium in Detroit's Cadillac Square and addressed sixty thousand enthusiastic supporters. His pro-labor speech praised collective bargaining, called for an increase in the minimum wage, and, echoing his conversation with his new friend Mudcat Grant, called upon America to put an end to bigotry: "I take my case to you because I know you agree with me that racial discrimination must be eliminated everywhere in our society; in jobs, in housing, in voting, in lunch counters, and in schools."

That same day, Mudcat Grant toed the rubber on the mound at Briggs Stadium. He pitched seven innings, striking out ten, but lost the game, 4-3.

Still, the day put a checkmark in a win column that no baseball fan could see. Grant had just met the man who might become president, and he seemed to care genuinely about the plight of blacks in Lacoochee and the rest of the country.

By 1960, the world was changing. Blacks were speaking out, mobilizing; they were demanding equality, forcing America to confront its bigotry, to wake up from the slumber it had been in.

One such voice belonged to Jackie Robinson.

Known in various circles as a pariah, a sacrificial lamb, and a national icon since breaking baseball's color line, Robinson had retired from the Brooklyn Dodgers after the 1956 season and had become a familiar face at civil rights protests.

Unlike Mudcat Grant, Robinson had little regard for John Kennedy. Rather, he was a loyal supporter of the Republican nominee, Vice President Richard Nixon. He wasn't alone. Black voters had long backed the GOP; it was the party of Lincoln, the party of emancipation. Conversely, it was Democrats who during Reconstruction had formed the Ku Klux Klan, the organization bent on restoring white supremacy. And while the advent of the '60s saw an evolving ideology in both parties, blacks were still an important voting bloc. As late as 1956, black Americans helped get Dwight D. Eisenhower reelected, with 39 percent of their vote.

"I wanted to be fair about things, so I went to see both Kennedy and Nixon," Robinson told Roger Kahn in *The Boys of Summer*. "Now, Nixon seemed to understand a little bit of what had to be done. John Kennedy said, 'Mr. Robinson, I don't know much about the problems of colored people since I come from New England.' I figured, the hell with that. Any man in Congress for fifteen years ought to make it his business to know colored people."

Robinson also took issue with Kennedy on another matter. The senator, an avowed liberal, had courted a handful of ultraconservative southern governors during his campaign. Most insiders and journalists recognized that Kennedy was in the political fight of his life and had little choice but to solicit every vote he could get. Still, the ballplayer-cum-activist insisted the senator had sold his soul to a devil known as the segregated South.

Robinson preached from his pulpit, a nationally syndicated column in the *New York Post* (written with playwright William Branch).

"As long as he continues to play politics at the expense of 18,000,000 Negro Americans," he wrote in June 1960, "Senator Kennedy is not fit to be president of the United States."

In September, Robinson took a leave from the paper to campaign for Nixon.

In October, his words came back to haunt him.

The precipitating incident was a sit-in at Rich's Department Store in downtown Atlanta—a protest that included civil rights leader Martin Luther King.

King had deep roots in Atlanta. It was the city in which he'd been born and where he'd spent most of his thirty-one years fighting racial injustice. (He spent four years at Boston University in the 1950s earning a doctorate in theology.) It was also where he and fifty-nine other black ministers and civil rights leaders had founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), with the mission of abolishing segregation and putting an end to racial injustice.

At Rich's, King and a group of college students challenged the store's segregation policy by requesting service in its “white-only” restaurant, the Magnolia Room. When they were denied, the protesters remained seated—waiting to be served or arrested, whichever came first.

Similar sit-in protests had been spreading throughout the South for months, starting in February when four black freshmen at North Carolina's Agricultural and Technical College took seats at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The Greensboro five-and-dime, with its marble stairs, rose-tinted mirrors, and twenty-five thousand square feet of retail space, allowed black shoppers to spend their money throughout the store—but not at the luncheonette. The students, Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, David Richmond, and Ezell Blair Jr., took seats at the counter, and when no one would serve them, they asked why they weren't welcome.

“We don't serve colored here,” the clerk told them.

Following their well-rehearsed strategy, all four stayed put on their chrome stools, opened their textbooks, and studied quietly, staging a sit-in so un-Greensboro-like that even a black dishwasher called them stupid, ignorant troublemakers.

But twenty-four more students joined the protest the next morning, and still more the day after that. Soon hundreds of students, including coeds from nearby Bennett College, had packed the store, pressuring Woolworth's into serving black shoppers a fresh-brewed cup of equality.

It wasn't long before groups of white segregationists rolled onto South Elm Street by the truckload, hurling racial epithets, pelting eggs at the

passive protesters, even burning them with scalding coffee and setting their clothes on fire. The F. W. Woolworth Company kept silent on the matter. The only word coming from its headquarters in New York City was that the company had a policy of adhering to local custom—which in Greensboro, included the segregation of public dining facilities.

After a week of raging tension and hostility, a phoned-in bomb threat put an end to the sit-in—but the Greensboro lunch counter was still off limits to black customers. Five months later, after suffering nearly two hundred thousand dollars in losses as a result of further demonstrations, picketing, and boycotts, store manager Clarence Harris had arranged for three black employees to order a meal at the counter, thus officially desegregating the Greensboro Woolworth's. By the middle of October, another 150 lunch counters in variety stores throughout the South had followed suit. Although many of its stores in the Deep South remained segregated, F. W. Woolworth insisted that progress was being made.

That wasn't the case at Rich's Department Store in Atlanta.

Upon refusing to leave the Magnolia Room, Martin Luther King and his fellow activists were promptly arrested. Charges were dropped against many of the demonstrators, but King and thirty-five others remained in custody, refusing bail on the grounds that they had not violated the law.

While awaiting arraignment, King drafted a statement to the judge, defending his right to assemble peacefully to “seek service just as any other citizen.” He explained his actions by saying, “If by chance, your honor, we are guilty of violating the law please be assured that we did it to bring the whole issue of racial injustice under the scrutiny of the conscience of Atlanta. I must honestly say that we firmly believe that segregation is evil, and that our southland will never reach its full economic, political, and moral maturity until this cancerous disease is removed.”

Dekalb County judge J. Oscar Mitchell was unmoved by King's statement. Instead, he found King guilty on a series of trumped-up charges unrelated to the sit-in and sentenced him to four months' hard labor in a public works camp.

Jackie Robinson turned to his chosen leader, Richard Nixon, for help in freeing King—but the vice president refused.

As Robinson continued trying to bend the inflexible Nixon, Senator Kennedy stepped in. He called Coretta Scott King to reassure her that she had his support.

“I want to express to you my concern about your husband,” Kennedy is quoted as saying in Coretta Scott King’s *My Life with Martin Luther King*. “I understand you are expecting a baby, and I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King. If there is anything I can do to help, please feel free to call on me.”

Robert Kennedy, the senator’s brother and campaign manager, feared that news of the conversation would jeopardize the southern vote and, therefore, Kennedy’s chances of election. Still, he was furious enough to call Judge Mitchell at the courthouse and appeal to his sense of justice. The next morning, King was released on a two-thousand-dollar bond.

When Robinson asked Nixon why he hadn’t intervened to help King, the vice president accused his opponent of grandstanding. Robinson was dismayed and went so far as to tell Nixon’s speechwriter, William Safire, “Nixon doesn’t deserve to win.”

Despite increased pressure from other civil rights activists to switch his allegiance to Kennedy, Robinson couldn’t bring himself to divorce the Republican candidate. Against the advice of his wife, Rachel, he stuck by Nixon, insisting that the GOP would once again be the party of emancipation.

But the damage had been done.

Once Kennedy had gone to bat for King, black voters shifted so strongly to the Democratic ticket that they tipped as many as five states in the senator’s favor.

The lead held, and the following month, Kennedy defeated Nixon by a wide margin in the electoral vote, 303 to 219, but by a mere one-tenth of one percent in the popular vote. It was one of the closest elections in American history.

After the election, the *New York Post* dropped Jackie Robinson’s column.

Still, the ex-ballplayer remained committed to the losing side.